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UDL Paper

Research:

The Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a set of guiding principles to help teachers reach every student and provide them with a high-quality, meaningful education in a way that best serves them. It focuses on using students’ strengths and interests and catering to their educational needs. There are three main principles that characterize UDL: multiple means of representation, action and expression, and engagement. Each principle offers different ways to for students to interact with content and prove their acquisition of the content.

Through my research about UDL I came across a tool that we have used in our building—the UDL Wheel that outlines ideas and examples for engaging students in each of the three guiding principles. For the first principle, multiple means of representation, the wheel offers suggestions and options for perception, language and symbols, and comprehension. These are strategies and ideas that educators can use when creating lessons to help reach every student. The main idea behind perception is thinking about how to best present information to students. Students should have a variety of visual images to reference and use. This aids the visual learners and gives them a better way to enter the curriculum. This component also takes into account color, volume, font, and speed/timing of audio-visual materials. The language and symbols component of Principle 1 focuses on pre-teaching vocabulary, terms, and themes to encourage students to be successful. It also emphasizes supporting students as necessary by clarifying terms, formulas, or charts and to highlight complex terms or ideas and how they can be broken down into simpler ideas or words. The final component of Principle 1 is comprehension. This is the goal of learning. We want students to be able to digest and understand the material we are presenting to them. In order to do this there are a lot of strategies offered through UDL. Activating prior knowledge and connecting new learning to previously learned material helps students to see the connection between ideas and concepts. Comprehension can also be supported with organizers, chunking assignments, and checklists. All of these help students to make connections and see themes and concepts that are embedded across several topics.

The second principle- Action and Expression, also has several components that help to break this down for teachers. The first component is focusing of physical action. Varying classroom activities is essential for keeping students engaged and focused and this should definitely be considered when designing lessons and class activities. Students need to have an opportunity to move around and some students learn better than they can interact with the material in this way. The second component is expressive skills and fluency. This component focuses on giving students access to materials and manipulatives that will help enhance their learning experience and scaffold the content appropriately. Some students are very hands-on learners and the use of manipulatives would be very helpful to take an abstract idea and make it more concrete. The final component for Principle 2 focuses on executive functioning. This is giving students a chance to monitor their learning and to help them grow as a student. The use of prompts, guides, checklists, and chunking assignments help students process an assignment. These are strategies that can be used for daily assignments as well as larger, long-term projects.

The final principle has components that help sustain students’ attention and interest in the content. The first is for recruiting interest. Students are more interested in content if it is relevant and if they can see some meaning in what they are doing. Doing something or the sake of doing it is not very motivating for a middle schooler. Creating a variety of activities that involve things that the students are interested in is a great way to capture their interest. This also helps to personalize the educational experience. The next component focuses on sustaining effort and encouraging perseverance. This is helping students to stay motivated and working on a project or task. Chunking or breaking assignments down is a great way to model for students how to take a large, possibly overwhelming task and make it more manageable. Scaffolding rules and making directions very clear also help with this. If students know what it expected of them it is easier to get them to continue and persevere with a task. The final component of Principle 3 is helping students to be self-monitors. This ties closely to executive functioning skills from Principle 2. Giving students access to rubrics, guidelines, and activities where they get constructive feedback helps them to know how and what areas they can improve in.

Universal Design for Learning has been embraced by the Howard County Public School System. During curriculum writing, all lesson plans we created were measured against a checklist with the different principles of UDL. We had to make sure we encompassed the different methodologies. This was particularly helpful looking over lessons I have written and lessons others have written because it helps bring UDL directly to the classroom. I find it very helpful to see how other teachers implement some of the principles and guidelines of UDL. The state also has resources online that help show was UDL looks like in a classroom—how UDL can be applied to instructional materials, instructional methods, and assessments. Some of the ideas I have been implementing in my classroom and others were interesting ideas to ponder. Another resource I found to help teachers to implement UDL in the classroom is a wiki that outlines numerous resources to help students. There are resources with links to a wide variety of graphic organizers, study skill tools, collaborative tools, research tools, math tools, and tools that compensate for handwriting issues. Several of these were very interesting and I am going to try and implement in my classroom or provide them to parents and students outside of the classroom.

Overall, UDL encompasses a wide variety of teaching suggestions and principles that can help an educator reach every student in the class. These are important guidelines to keep in mind when creating and implementing lessons. In order for students to be successful we must meet their educational needs.

Reflection:

There are aspects of UDL that I think should be incorporated into classes on a regular basis, but expecting every aspect of UDL to be incorporated into every class everyday is slightly unrealistic. Planning an activity that is suitable for every learning style every day takes away other aspects of a math classroom. We spend a lot of time in math discussing, constructing arguments and critiquing reasoning. If students are all completing different projects or interacting with the material in different ways a valuable component of discourse is lost. It also makes it more difficult for students to learn from one another. Instead, I think the aspects of UDL should be encompassed on the larger scale. I purposefully plan activities throughout the week that cater to the different learning styles. We have activities and station activities were students are up and moving around. We have games were students must work together as a team to complete a challenge and then strategize about selecting points. I plan activities that give students a chance to digest the material independently and work through problems in a way that makes sense to them. I plan activities that use graphic organizers to help the visual learners process the material. I think the characteristics of UDL should be addressed in this manner. I approach my classroom and teaching through a UDL lens by keeping the different learning styles and activities in mind when planning activities and lessons. My students interact with the content in a wide variety of ways throughout the week. My students will not be seen sitting and taking notes day in and day out. Instead, we may formalize some notes once a week, but then we are using that information to solve problems or tasks.

Several times throughout the year I will sit down and long range plan and tentatively map out a unit or two. This helps me with pacing, but also gives me a chance to think through how many days I will spend on each subset of a unit. I make sure that there are several days with each skill so that students will have several different ways to interact with the material—notes, a hands-on activity, and a problem solving activity. While doing this I can also make deliberate choices about how I want my students to work through a certain topic. One out-of-class assignment that I like to give is a Tic Tac Toe homework board. This gives students nine activities to choice from. They only have to choose three of the activities to complete to show that they have mastered the material. Activities include creating posters and visuals, creating poems or raps, creating worksheets, or creating collages. All of these require students to demonstrate their proficiency in a different way than just completing a set of problems. This also allows students to chose the activities that most interest them. I really enjoy giving these assignments because it also allows students to showcase their talents. I have some very artistic students who really like to draw and showcase their learning that way. I also have some very creative students when it comes to creating raps and poems. These are all different ways that they can show me they have mastered the material.

This is how I incorporate the ideals and principles of UDL into my classroom. There are certain activities that students enjoy more than others, but the variety of classroom activities gives students a chance to work with the material in a way that makes sense to them. Every educator should use these principles as a guide to help their students be successful. Students should not be doing the same thing every day because that neglects the other learning styles. Educators need to make deliberate choices about the types of activities used in the classroom and how information is presented to students. If this is done regularly, we are encouraging our students to be successful and enjoy school.

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